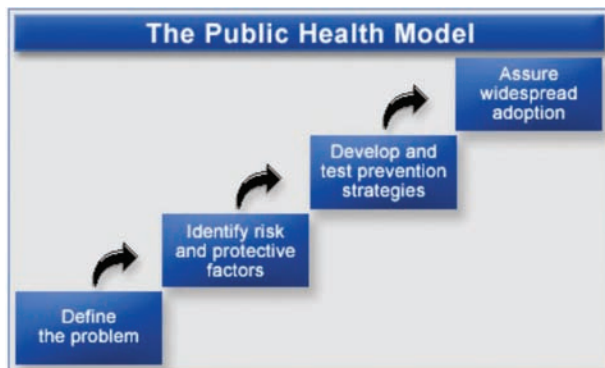


Marriage as a Public Health Issue

Marriage, although it is considered a private matter in many respects, is a public health issue. There is a body of evidence that positively links marriage with physical and mental health. Furthermore, research suggests that child well-being is improved when the child's parents are married.

In recent years, social service providers across the U.S. have begun offering relationship education services to young single people and couples to strengthen their relationships and teach skills that foster healthy relationships. There are opportunities for social service organizations to continue this work, for health care providers to integrate this work, and for the public to learn about this work. This Tip Sheet provides background information on *how* marriage can be viewed through a "public health" lens.



Source: [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](http://www.cdc.gov)

A public health issue is anything that threatens the overall health of the population; this includes the promotion of the mental, physical, and emotional well-being of the general population. The example above identifies the model through which a public health issue is identified and action is taken to change behavior.



Public health issues are not without controversy. First an issue must be defined and agreed upon. Common public health issues include smoking, childhood obesity, seatbelt non-use, and drinking and driving. Changing the public perception of these issues is not an easy task. Gaining consensus that the problem is one of public concern can be a challenge.

Although not everyone will get married or want to (just like not everyone will smoke or consider quitting), marriage is a topic for public concern. Marriage is a public health issue because:

1. *Most people marry.* According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the probability that men and women will marry by age 40 is over 80%.
2. *Marriage is associated with positive outcomes for adults.* Married men have greater longevity, earn more money, and are healthier. Married women live longer, are less depressed, and are emotionally healthier, although their relative gains from marriage are somewhat less than those of men (Marriage and Public Health, Institute for American Values brief, 2001).

3. *Marriage is associated with positive outcomes for children.* Children of married parents are physically and mentally healthier, and better educated, yet 32% of children are living in single-parent families (Kids Count 2008).

According to researchers, there are risk factors that are within an individual's control. Successfully addressing the following risks can influence the likelihood that a marriage will be successful. These include:

- Young age at first marriage
- Poor communication skills
- Trouble handling disagreements
- Unrealistic beliefs or expectations about marriage
- Low level of commitment
- Living together before marriage (with or without being engaged)
- Knowing each other for only a short time before marriage

There are two strategies for addressing these risk factors. One is to teach skills and the second is to increase awareness.

Teaching Skills

To protect against these factors, marriage and relationship education (MRE) can teach communication skills, problem solving skills, and tools to safely discuss expectations and beliefs. These

skills can be taught to anyone, such as young people considering their first dating relationship or couples who have been married for 20 years. Currently a variety of programs across the county are testing strategies that teach these skills. A meta-analysis of MRE programs operating before the mid-2000's (or "first generation" programs) found that individuals and couples who participated in MRE were 40–50% better off overall in terms of relationship quality and 50–60% better off in terms of communication skills, as compared to those who did not have MRE (Hawkins et al). A more recent meta-analysis of programs operating since the mid-2000's (or "second generation" programs) found those who had received MRE were 20–30% better off compared to those who did not (Hawkins et al). In general, these findings indicate current strategies are working for a wide variety of demographics. Various strategies are being implemented to strengthen marriage; however, the field is in the early stage of testing and broadly adopting evidence-based programs.

Increasing Awareness

Public awareness can influence the age at first marriage, couples' decisions to live together and the duration of the courtship prior to making the decision to marry. It is important to keep from "scaring" people into thinking they will get sick if they don't marry when considering public health campaigns related to marriage. Like encouraging good nutrition, not everyone will do all of these things; however, the more people know about the positive things they can do, the more likely a positive outcome results. (Information on the effectiveness of MRE public-awareness campaigns is not available at this time).

Practitioners in the field of marriage and relationship education have begun to develop strategies and test

messages to encourage healthy marriage. However, this field is still young and they are still learning. Some key public awareness messages about healthy marriage may include:

- Couples should wait until they are well into their twenties to get married.
- Kids do best when raised by their married parents.
- Having a good marriage isn't just for the lucky ones -everyone can learn skills to be a better partner.
- Violence is never part of a good marriage and no one should ever have to feel scared in a marriage.
- Like keeping in shape, eating well and avoiding risky behaviors, having a good marriage does take effort, but it is possible.

Marriage is not a panacea for social ills. Being married won't cure all social problems, but it can improve the health of families and communities. Marriage as a public health issue is not about promoting marriage for the sake of marriage, but it *is* about keeping marriage in the public dialogue as a healthy choice for adults. As the field continues to evolve and more programs are tested, marriage as a public health issue will continue to develop.

The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC) would like to thank Courtney Harrison, MPA of the Resource Center for her contributions to this Tip Sheet. This is a product of the NHMRC, led by co-directors Mary Myrick, APR, and Jeanette Hercik, PhD, and project manager Rich Batten, ThM, MEd, CFLE.